

farm labor, general

THE CONDITION OF FARM WORKERS IN 1956

REPORT TO THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND, INC.

By Fay Bennett, Executive Secretary

"We have known humiliation...we have been plunged into the abyss of oppression. We are tired of the conditions we experienced for so many years..."

Thus spoke a Negro leader in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1956. With the backing of federal courts, and with the sympathetic support and help of men and women of good-will throughout the land, Negroes move ahead toward a greater share of the democratic heritage due them. But progress has not come without pain.

GROWTH OF WHITE CITIZENS COUNCILS; ECONOMIC PRESSURE AGAINST NEGROES

From an estimated 250,000 members a year ago, the White Citizens Councils, dedicated to the maintenance of white supremacy, have grown to approximately 350,000 in all the southern states. Although many of its officers appear as responsible leaders in their local communities, and eschew violence, the movement has drawn its largest following from the black belt (rich farming soil) areas where there exists the greatest contrast between wealthy plantation owner and poor farm folk -- both white and Negro. In these areas poverty and lack of education have produced the most bigotry and the most easily aroused white mob. In contrast, the Negro has demonstrated a civilized restraint in the face of severe provocation.

These Councils have acted in two ways to preserve the status quo: 1) overtly, by mob action to prevent enforcement of Court orders for school integration; 2) covertly, by economic pressures against Negroes who are enrolled voters or otherwise indicate their insistence on rights guaranteed them by the Constitution.

An example of the former is the Clinton, Tennessee mob which, aroused by the outsider, John Kasper, almost succeeded in overthrowing civil law in that community because 12 Negro students were enrolled in its high school. This mob was made up primarily of the poor farm folk in the hill country outside Clinton.

Numerous cases of the latter, the covert economic pressure, have come to the attention of National Sharecroppers Fund. In many of these, after proper investigation, NSF has made non-interest bearing loans to tenant and independent small farmers who were about to lose their property, farm equipment and other possessions. One case involved a man's voting right; another his membership in the NAACP; a third his leadership among local Negro farmers working to set up a cooperative organization for their mutual help.

CONTINUING POVERTY ON THE LAND

There are nearly one and one-half million farm families in the United States with incomes of less than \$1,000 a year. Of these, nearly one million live in the South. Although Negroes constituted only about one-tenth of the total of the 5,226,000 farm families in the country in 1954, they made up almost one-third of these one million in the South with annual incomes of less than \$1,000. Very little is being done to help this group of Americans whose living and health standards and educational opportunities are clearly inadequate for them to realize their best potentialities as citizens and human beings.

Today the greatest contrast between wealth and poverty in our country has shifted from yesterday's captains of finance and the factory worker to today's corporate farm owner and the men and their families who work in the fields. The world's most efficient producers of farm products -- Americans -- have not eliminated dire poverty among those who work on the farms.

FAMILY FARMS

All family farms -- not just the lowest income group -- are approaching crisis. Government programs, while admitting their serious plight, are permitting over 100,000 family farms yearly to go out of business. Many of these are young farm families, former GI's who started farming hopefully after World War II.

Though given government aid to get started, they have been abandoned to a policy or lack of policy which permits them to be squeezed out before they can become firmly established. According to the 1955 Census of Agriculture, commercial family farms dropped by 11% from 1950 to 3,193,000 units while industrialized factory farms increased by 26% to 134,000. There was a drop of 353,000 in the number of owner-operated farms, a drop of 276,000 in the number of tenant-operated farms, and an increase of 32,000 in the number of part-owner operated farms.

A House of Representatives' sub-committee, under the chairmanship of Clark W. Thompson of Texas, reported in August, 1956, after a 3000 mile tour of grass-roots family farms that more than 600,000 of them had failed in the last four years. It stated that they were forced out by the industrial-type (corporate) farm invasion.

Family farms are generally defined as those where an owner-operator and his family furnish at least one-half of the farm labor, with gross sales of less than \$25,000 annually. Disregarding the cultural value of these family producing units, it should be emphasized that they constitute the major element in the farm labor force and the backbone hitherto of America's "private enterprise" economy. They need not be wiped out. They can produce efficiently and compete effectively with the corporate farms through wider use of electric power and increased mechanization if they can get equal treatment in government subsidies and credit, and if all domestic farm labor is not exploited by lack of government protection and by government promotion of foreign contract labor.

THE CORPORATE FARM

The corporate -- or industrialized -- farm warrants a full current study that cannot be made here. Its influence on the labor market is indicated in various sections of this report. The vast amount of federal subsidy these enterprises receive is illustrated by two examples:

Delta and Pine Land Company of Mississippi received a \$1,292,472.25 federal loan on its 1954 cotton crop. Louisiana Irrigation and Mill Company received a \$486,725.77 price support check on its 1954 rice crop.

It is the food and fiber producers such as these which throw the sharecropper and small farmer into the migrant stream, which support an imported labor program that is the key factor in keeping the wages of farm labor at less than one half the American average and in preventing effective union organization to better farm labor conditions, and which receive the bulk of federal subsidies.

CONTRACT LABOR

The imported contract labor system, begun as an emergency wartime measure, continues to grow apace. At peak employment in 1956, there were 458,038 foreign contract workers in agriculture. Of these, the vast majority, 445,197, came from Mexico with whom the United States has an international agreement. This number was a 21% increase over the 367,481 Mexicans who worked legally under contract in 1955.

At the same time, the number of illegal entrants ("wetbacks") has been declining steadily for the past two years due in part to the vigilance of the Border Patrol's activity. Apprehensions during the fiscal year 1956 totaled 72,442. The government's policy has been one of clamping down on illegal entry and encouraging the importation of workers under contract.

Of the other imported contract workers, 8504 came from the British West Indies and 3870 from the Bahamas. Some came from Canada.* This entire program is

*The Department of Justice reports that there were 7210 Canadian agricultural workers in the United States under contract in the fiscal year 1955-56. This is unaccounted for in the quoted 1956 calendar year totals supplied by the Department of Labor.

supervised by the Department of Labor with 87 compliance officers authorized in the current budget. Many of these officers have other duties to perform.

A new development in the contract program is the importation by air from Japan of 386 farm workers (out of 918 who had been certified for employment). These workers were admitted under a section of the Immigration Act which permits entry to an alien "who is coming temporarily to the United States to perform... temporary services or labor, if unemployed persons capable of performing such service or labor cannot be found." Under the Japanese program, there is no agreement between governments but only between the individual Japanese workers and the growers' association which hires them. Enforcement of the provisions in the agreements rests with the Immigration Service which has even fewer compliance officers than the Department of Labor. All of the inequities of the Mexican program and more are likely to befall the Japanese worker, with more than 3,000 miles of ocean between his place of work and his homeland.

If a contract labor system is necessary for agriculture (which NSF doubts), a striking example of how it might work fairly and effectively is seen in the Puerto Rican program. An all-time high of 14,876 of these island Americans worked under agreements formulated and supervised by the Puerto Rican Department of Labor in 1956. This was almost 28% more than the 11,629 who came in 1955. It is estimated by Puerto Rican authorities that another 14,000 came on their own, having learned their rights from previous contract employment.

The Puerto Rican contract not only guarantees 160 hours of pay in each four-week period but protects the working and living conditions as well. It is carefully supervised by the Migration Division, which opened nine new offices during the year, eight of which were in the Middle Atlantic and New England states where most of the Puerto Ricans work.

In contrast, here is an example of what happens under the foreign contract system:

In Phillips County, Arkansas, in June of 1956, United States workers were paid 35¢ to 40¢ an hour. Farm workers in the county that month were made up of 1,000 United States workers and 1,055 Mexicans. The Mexican workers theoretically were receiving 50¢ an hour, the minimum to which the Mexican government will agree. By July and August, the rate for U.S. workers had fallen to 35¢ an hour.

While National Sharecroppers Fund is concerned for the well-being of the imported worker for whom the "hospitality" extended usually falls far short of the rosy promises made, it is even more gravely concerned with the conditions under which the domestic farm worker and his family live, which are far below the minimum for most urban workers. Can there be any doubt that the wages of U.S. workers will remain depressed when growers know they always have available a steady supply of contract workers imported from countries whose living standards are far below those of the United States, who have no bases here, and who can, therefore, be threatened with deportation if they do not accept what is offered them.

Because of the seriousness of this importation program, the Board of Directors of National Sharecroppers Fund wrote on November 8 to Secretary of Labor James P. Mitchell calling for a public investigation of it. The letter stated in part: "The whole contract importation program for agricultural labor is an anomaly. Superimposed on our free labor system by wartime necessity, it continues, according to repeated charges, for the benefit of the corporate farmer and to the detriment of the American farm worker." The letter concluded: "We strongly urge that this program be thoroughly aired in public hearings in which labor, farm interests, government, and citizen organizations are invited to present all facts available. We would be glad to cooperate with such public hearings." The Board's letter received wide attention in the metropolitan and labor press.

On December 28, three days before it was due to expire, the international agreement between Mexico and the United States was extended to June, 1959, bringing

a storm of protests from Mexican agricultural and business leaders as well as from labor and other groups in this country.

MIGRANT LABOR

The million domestic migrating workers who (usually with their families) pull up stakes constantly as they search for employment on the land is causing increasing public concern. The President's Committee on Migratory Labor, under the able direction of Henry K. Arneson, has made significant progress working with a small budget. During the year it published suggested regulations for agricultural labor camps and for transportation of agricultural workers. With no power to secure state adoption of these regulations, the Committee nevertheless did valuable work in bringing them to the attention of public and private groups for action. What is needed is an expanded appropriation for the work of this Committee, plus legislation on national and state levels.

One decided victory for migrant labor came during the summer when Congress passed a law providing for the regulation of migrant farm workers during interstate transportation. Though the law as it finally passed was whittled down by the opponents of all regulation (it only covers workers if the distance traveled is more than 75 miles), it marks a long step forward. A large part of the credit for its passage is due the organizations, including NSF, which vigorously supported it. Transportation of farm workers within a state is still largely unregulated.

For the worse came changes in the Social Security Law which in 1955 had included coverage for some farm workers for the first time. An amendment now reduces the number of workers covered by specifying that a worker must earn \$150 from the same farmer (previously it was \$100), and that he must work 20 days during the year for a single employer on a time basis, thereby excluding most migrants. Another provision permits the crew leader to be listed as the employer instead of the farmer, giving the crew leader a status and responsibility which he usually is unable to fulfill.

ORGANIZED LABOR - National Agricultural Workers Union

The merged labor movement has let a year pass with no program on behalf of farm labor. Nevertheless, sugar and rice workers in Louisiana continued their struggle to organize through the leadership of the National Agricultural Workers Union despite many obstacles. One of these obstacles was the backing given by the state labor council for "right to work" legislation (denying a union agreement) to apply to agricultural workers in exchange for repeal of this law as it affected industrial workers. Thus, workers on the bottom of the economic ladder were given a thrust downward by their fellow workers who were one step higher on the ladder.

There was an increase in activity on behalf of small dairy farmers in Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Small local unions of cotton plantation workers still exist in Arkansas, Alabama and Mississippi where the National Agricultural Workers Union was first started nearly 25 years ago as the Southern Tenant Farmers Union -- interracial when it began, and interracial today. NSF continues to give substantial financial assistance to this union whose leaders and members, despite years of discouraging setbacks, have never lost their faith in the strength of the farm worker to help himself through organization.

MIGRANT CHILDREN

There were several more summer schools conducted for migrant children in Colorado, New York, and Michigan, with state and private support. These alleviate the educational problem for a small number of these children. Of greater significance are the year-round programs to integrate migrant children into the regular school program wherever they may be. The Florida-Virginia project toward this end, sponsored by a number of organizations including NSF through the National Council on Agricultural Life and Labor in cooperation with the two states, has entered its third year with every indication that its pioneering program will serve to stimulate such efforts in other areas. The Migrant

Children's Fund, initiated by NSF, is cooperating with other agencies in working to establish a similar project in the Spanish-speaking stream of migrants in the Southwest.

NATIONAL COUNCIL ON AGRICULTURAL LIFE AND LABOR

Bringing together the major national organizations with an interest in this field, NCALL is admirably suited to coordinating and developing programs and projects to secure maximum support. NSF is an active co-operating member of this council. A major accomplishment during the year was its all-day round table on "Farm Policy and Social Welfare" attended by representatives of fifty-five national and state organizations and agencies. NCALL provides its member organizations with information of important developments on the farm front.

NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND

On October 27, 1956, Dr. Charles Spurgeon Johnson, president of Fisk University and vice-chairman of NSF, died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 63. His death shocked and saddened men and women of goodwill throughout the world for Dr. Johnson had achieved a unique role as social thinker, educator, and contributor to understanding among all people. His passing is a deeply-felt loss to the Board of the Fund.

New Board members elected during the year are Miss Angela Bambace, Mr. Martin Gerber, Mr. Gardner Jackson, Dr. C. B. Powell, Mr. A. Philip Randolph and Miss Vera Rony.

Recognition

When NSF raised a substantial sum in a two-week period in December to prevent the foreclosure of a valuable farm in Mississippi owned by Negroes who were facing stiff pressure, a leader in one of the organizations bearing the brunt of the struggle for Negro rights wrote "...I am quite lost in admiration at the effectiveness with which you manage somehow to achieve these minor miracles. I think that the ultimate value to the general cause in which we are all engaged is likely to be inestimable." National Sharecroppers Fund cooperates with a number of religious and other groups in carrying forward this effort.

With its activities on a number of fronts in support of economic justice and civil rights for Negroes and whites in the South, NSF proudly notes its listing among a specially selected group of six organizations and individuals "who have done the most during the year to advance the cause of harmonious race relations." A distinguished panel of judges made the selection.

National Sharecroppers Fund Publications

NSF reports and publications and other pamphlets it distributes are reaching an ever-widening audience. Currently available are:

Strangers in Our Fields by Dr. Ernesto Galarza. Based on a report regarding compliance with the contractual, legal and civil rights of Mexican agricultural contract labor in the United States. 80 pages. 50¢.

Down on the Farm -- The Plight of Agricultural Labor. A popular presentation of the people and problems involved in planting, cultivating and harvesting the nation's crops. 14 pages. 25¢.

The Condition of Farm Workers in 1956. Single additional copies of this five-page report to the Board of NSF available free.

Since its inception nearly 20 years ago, National Sharecroppers Fund has lent its moral and financial support to projects and programs designed to bring a better way of life to men, women and children who produce the nation's food and fiber, but who receive so little of the fruits of their labor. It has been a slow, uphill struggle, and the end is not yet in sight. But progress is being made. More and more Americans are becoming aware of this deep well of poverty amid our nation's prosperity.

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